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ABSTRACT

Syntax, or, loosely, sentence structure, is a major linguistic variable influencing the comprehensibility of every written sentence. This paper attempts to set forth the relationship between elements of syntax and reading comprehension as the classroom teacher might see them, and to propose a strategy, the Complete Linguistic Elements Paradigm (CLEP), which the teacher might use to enable students to reach their potential to comprehend. The CLEP design is a single-element-at-a-time instructional technique and can be employed with individual students or small groups. It is meant to complement a full reading/language arts program. (Author/RB)

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Linguistic Interferences to Reading Comprehension: Emphasis Syntax

Syntax, or, loosely, sentence structure, is a major linguistic variable influencing the comprehensibility of every written sentence. This paper attempts to set forth the relationship extant between elements of syntax and reading comprehension as the classroom teacher might see them, and to propose a strategy - the "Complete Linguistic Elements Paradigm" - which the teacher might use to enable each student to reach his potential to comprehend.

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Key Linguistic Elements in Comprehension

Six features of printed English, here referred to as "key linguistic elements" are posited to be uniquely related to print tradition and frequently found to be associated with comprehension problems. They are: syntactic patterns, 'word clusters,' allusions, style variations, phonic representation of speech sounds, and unusual uses of punctuation, print markings and other such signals.

There is abundant evidence that teachers and students share at least one frustration which provides them a common bond of experience that is, the frustration over not being able to make one's self understood and not being able to understand another's message. Whether it is the toddler asking the Lord, "Lead us not into Penn Station," or the seventh grader defining a canal as "a dish of water," or the English teacher pondering the meaning of a student's poignant theme title "I hate when it rains," the problem is language - the meaning of the word, word groups and sentences.

Maturing readers encounter the problem; beginning readers to a lesser extent, the reason being that these linguistic features are imbedded more heavily in sophisticated print traditions rather than the simple ones. The student knows he knows his native language, and he can readily show his virtuosity with his language by both tracing the threads of continuity of thought which are woven into his speech and by being able to express one idea in several ways, depending upon situational dynamics. But often the same student is unable to trace the thread of one idea through a printed sentence or paragraph, and seems overwhelmed when confronted with the task of picking up two or three such interwoven strands of ideas and handling their literal as well as

inferential relationships when they are presented to him in print. The intellectual requirements of oral and written language may be the same, but the traditions of oral and written patterns are so different that many competent oral language users appear to be hopeless cases when required by the teacher to read and write, both of which demand some sophistication with the tradition of print medium.

One way in which this difficulty with print tradition can be illustrated is in the students' handling of basic syntactic or structural patterns used in sentences. In both the reading and writing activities of the English curriculum, many students appear to be inept because they fail to make a connection between their personal manner of linking ideas verbally and the requirements of print. Comprehension of individual words or strings of words may not be a problem, that is, comprehension at the literal level. But appreciation of the interplay of forces within the sentences - the effect of certain word-classes upon shades of meaning - often does not take place.

As an illustration of this point, the understanding and use of verbs is relevant. The understanding of how a verb functions as an agent or conveyor within any of the ten or so basic sentence structural patterns remains a mystery to many students even after years have been spent in attempts to teach them. Transitive or intransitive, "become or remain" class verbs, "give" class, "consider" class, "elect" class, and particularly the "be" class verbs for black inner-city students are seemingly beyond them. "Why make a big deal," the student asks, about the difference between "He <u>seemed</u> happy then" and "He <u>was</u> happy then?" Implication of the choice by the author of "seemed" over "was" escapes the reader. The implication does not occur to the student writer. There are

aggravating problems with sentence structure in addition to verbs, but space does not permit further elaboration here.

A related difficulty is the problem of "word clusters" or language redundancy patterns. This may be thought of partly as "idiom," but should be broadened to include conventional, though unnoticed, clusters of words. Factor-analytic studies of cloze passage tests have indicated that lack of familarity with these "word clusters" is the primary cause of weak student performance on such tests. Familiarity with language redundancy patterns, or word clusters, also involves knowledge of many of the nuances of language which make possible anticipation of the likely next word in any series of words. And, therefore, greatly facilitates fluency, and to a degree comprehension.

Allusions, as distinct from vocabulary, are another source of linguistic, albeit lexical, difficulty. Allusions, etc., casual references, are part of the print tradition often over-looked as sources of difficulty. In oral speech, one who includes an allusion can be queried as to its meaning. However, the student reading print may notice an allusion, but because a handy source of information as to its meaning or association is not available to him at that instant, he may pass on by it. Soon he learns to ignore allusions. Thus, one large source for understanding and clarifying, ironically, becomes an additional source of misunderstanding and confusion.

To sophisticated readers, the style of a favorite author is as distinctive as a fingerprint. To the average student, the appreciation of a distinctive style in print is as mysterious as the Sphinx. While elements of style are taught in the English curriculum, perhaps even in some cases practiced in

composition work, the integration of knowledge of style which ultimately leads to more complete comprehension and attendant appreciation often go unrealized. This problem is materially multiplied in a typical anthology encompassing as it does variations in style from Milton's Paradise Lost to the "new jouralism" of Tom Wolfe, et, al.

Another aspect of the print tradition is the phonetic representation of sounds (such as "Varoom," which may be classed as onomatopoeia), to the phonetic representation of popular pronunciation (such as "Helluva" for "a Hell of a") and the phonetic representations of dialects(as when Mark Twain from a book on slavery injects - "Afraid! 'Taint likely becus if'n I wuz, Pa'd whip the genuwyne daylights outa me.") Students often react poorly to these printed forms. Such reactions should be understood for what they are: the sounds of frustration and confusion. Accordingly, the author's skill with these print-conventions to achieve an artistic effect may result in the negation of all effect.

Finally, certain punctuation markings and signals used in print are included on the "key elements" list. Signals such as e.g., viz, etc., and others are commonly used, but little understood. Use of the dash, ellipsis, and the consequences of quotation marks are equally common, and widely misunderstood.

Recently in a summer law school program an assignment was given to read certain portions of the book by John Hersey, Incident at the Algiers Motel. When questioned, some of the students condemned the author for portraying police in a bad light by having them speak dialog in the book which contained admissions from police of harassment, assault, battery and murder during the 1968 riots in Detroit. They were amazed to find that Hersey was quoting directly from court records, where the officers were under oath. Quotation marks were present in the text, as were

numerous attributions of the source in footnotes. Some in this class continued to believ that Hersey had made up the episodes despite the fact that these facts were pointed out to them. Many other examples could be cited of this type of difficulty with the print medium.

Degrees of Linguistic Difficulty

It is hypothesized that these key elements cause a student to have success or difficulty with print traditions in standard English because of three main factors: (1) relative influence of the language community in which the student lives and grows, (2) the degree of active and/or passive experience with standard English prior to and during early childhood and early schooling, (3) the proximity of speakers of the standard dialect in the everyday experience of the student. It is to be noted that the hypothesized factors have to do with prior language experiences of the student, and not with the print itself.

For example, a student of primary school age raised in the hills of Tennessee uses a dialect of English which reflects his experience and personal competence with the language of his community. His language responses are reinforced by interaction with his family and peers. Exposure to standard English may be minimal through television, radio and occasional communication with an "outsider" who speaks the dialect of the dormant culture.

A different category of experience would depict the black inner-city urban primary student. His dialect reflects his history and daily experiences also, with minimal exposure to standard English dialect. Due to media, including television and limited excursions into the city, as well as experience with his classroom teacher, he has probably developed a latent knowledge of many standard English linguistic elements, but their usage remains dormant. The hypothesized difference in language potential in the standard dialect between this student and his peer in the Tennessee hills is in this latency factor.

Contrasting with these students is the language experience of the white, middle class, suburban student. It can be stated with some confidence that this student possesses two academically important characteristics which the others mentioned do not possess. One is that the child of the midstreams of our society has what might be termed "core-cultural values." He comes from an environment where, either explicitly or implicitly, he has been conditioned to respond to the cues of the dominant culture. Many of these cues are imbedded in the language, that is, in the so-called standard English dialect. Thus, he is commonly described as possessing, at each level of instruction and at each critical juncture of his educational experience, what might be termed "optimal syntactic control" of his language. This student has syntactic control, and he is reinforced for his productive efforts in accordance with values he has previously learned.

The student from Tennessee and the black student from inner-city U.S.A. do not have optimal syntactic control of the standard English dialect. They are not reinforced in the same manner as their middle class peer because the value systems in which they live and have grown differ. Thus, often it can be said that these students do not have adequate syntactic control of standard English, and their value system is not that of the core culture. The mastery of the language of the core culture is not part of the natural system of conditioning in their lives. Consequently, an appropriate system is required for equalling this effect.

Control of the syntax of standard English leads to the appreciation and mastery of the key linguistic elements unique to the print tradition. Since print is the medium in which the subject matter of the curriculum is presented to the student, the consequences in the academic life of the pupils outside the mainstream of the core culture are indeed harsh.

It is toward the objective of language control and competence that the following teaching paradigm is directed.

A SYSTEM

Complete Linguistic Elements Paradigm (CLEP)

CLEP is not a method for teaching reading per se, although reading improvement is an expected by-product. CLEP is a training procedure designed to lead a student through a series of steps to mastery over the key linguistic elements in the print tradition noted earlier. The training paradigm treats one lingustic element at a time. In a step-by-step fashion, the student and the teacher proceed; the procedure is designed to accomodate student needs ranging from some linguistic abilities, to latent abilities, to no ability. A reversal of the steps of the procedure can be thought of as a diagnostic paradigm.

There are nine steps in the CLEP system. They are: 1) Visual fixing, 2) Auditory fixing, 3) Visual discrimination, 4) Auditory discrimination, 5) Identification in context, 6) Comprehension in context, 7) Encoding with and without cuing, 8) Spontaneous or incidental encoding, 9) Creation of alternative representatives.

Visual fixing - The student is presented with a sentence containing the lingusitic element for fixing - isolating and identifying the key elements. For example, the linguistic element to be fixed is the fundamental structural pattern: Subject (3rd[1] person), present[2] tense of "be," and an adverb of[3] time or place meaning. The instructor says, as he displays such a sentence to the student, "Listen to the three parts of this pattern within the sentence. 'Henry is there.'" As he

refers to the sentence, the instructor points to the parts, Henry-subject, is - verb, there - adverb telling "where?" The parts need not be named subject, verb, etc. They may simply be referred to as parts one, two and three. The instructor then asks the student to repeat the instructor's analysis with or without grammatical labels, or the substitution of any reasonable descriptive terms which might suit the student's age and grade level. This visual fixing could proceed with several other sentences of the same type, perhaps using feminine gender and different adverbs of place. There is no visual discrimination required in this step. It merely involves seeing and parroting. Each of the first four steps should be done to a 100% criterion level.

.Auditory fixing - When the student can successfully accomplish visual fixing the instructor directs the student to listen, but this time the analysis of parts is done without visual stimulus. This is auditory fixing, "Listen as I say a sentence with the three parts we just identified." Identify the three parts, then say, "Now listen to the sentence again. Tell me the three parts." Then once more, "Listen now to this sentence (structurally identical) and tell me its three parts."

.Visual discrimination - In this step the student is asked to recognize the previously learned visual pattern from conflicting patterns. "Which of these sentences is like the kind we have been learning about?" Show sentences:
(1) She is here. 2) Mary, our friend, went home. 3) Frank, come here.

.Auditory discrimination - This stage is similar to the visual discrimination step except that the stimulus is presented auditorially only, in this case a three part sentence pattern. The instructor might say "Listen to the following sentences. Tell me which is (are) like the 3 part type we have been studying - 'Alice, the big girl, went home;' 'Jack, look-out;' 'Terry is away.'"

It should be noted at this point that the CLEP steps start with the assumptions that the student does not know the pattern and that he can go from the visual pattern in print to the identification of the pattern in speech. This requires a relatively low level skill, recalling and recognizing patterns of similarity in oral speech and visual speech (print).

The next step in this process, still a relatively lower order skill, is to have the student make these same discriminations in the more representative context of a paragraph.

.Contextual identification - The student is presented with a simple paragraph with the sentence pattern imbedded.

There is a party at John's home.

Mary is there.

Fred did not come.

Will you come to John's party?

The student is expected to merely identify "Mary is there" as the syntax pattern under study.

.Comprehension in context - Here the student is asked to demonstrate that he is deriving meaning from the context. Have the student read the paragraph silently, then orally. Correct him on misread words which threaten to change the context. Then administer a simple test of a multiple choice type:

1. Where is the party? (A) John's (B) Fred's (C) Mary's
2. Who is not there? (A) John (B) Fred (C) Mary
3. Who is there? (A) John (B) Fred (C) Mary
4. How many may be at John's party? (A) 4 (B) 3 (C) 2 (D) 1

As a final check of comprehension, the student is asked to take the sentence "Mary is there" and to orally translate it into another form reflecting, perhaps,

another style of expression, such as, "Mary is at John's party." This could be difficult if a student is so primitive as to need lessons in the kind of sentence used in this example.

This step completes the first phase of the CLEP system. The process has led thus far from no knowledge of the pattern thru fixing and discrimination of the pattern using visual followed by auditory cuing, and thence to recognition in context, literal comprehension and translation of the message nested in the particular syntactic pattern.

The next phase of the CLEP system differs from the previous steps because its purpose is to lead the student to produce the pattern in his speech and writing. The previous steps were tantamount to learning how to decode a message imbedded in a certain pattern. In the remaining three steps, the goal is to induce the student who now has control of the pattern in his "recognition" repertoire to begin to use it in his encoding behavior; i.e., going from a thought to the system of coding used in print.

.Encode - ENCODE FROM STIMULUS WITH CUING.

In this step the instructor might say: "I want you to make up a sentence with a name, the word "is" as a verb and an adverb of place. Here is an example, 'Riki is away.' Now, you make a sentence for me like that one." Notice, while the language protocol uses grammatical terms, the charge, combined with the example, tend to simplify the statement. We prefer this approach, it provides additional incidental instruction.

.ENCODE FROM STIMULUS WITHOUT CUING.

This variation reduces the cues to the student by the instructor in order to see that he is able to encode without a model. The instructor might say,

"Make up a sentence with a pronoun followed by 'is' and an adverb of place." When the student can do this properly, the pattern can be said to be established. This step would have to be stated differently if the grammatical language said to be preferred above were eschewed. The next step is to observe to see that the pattern occurs outside the instructional framework.

.ENCODE - NO STIMULUS - NO CUING.

In this step, the instructor carefully watches for this pattern to occur spontaneously in the writing and speech of the student. Frequent opportunities are offered for this to occur, through suggestions for written expression and by opportunities to rephrase or to re-cast statements into the now familiar pattern. The major effort on the instructor's part in this step is to reinforce in a positive way each instance of the pattern when it is emitted spontaneously by the student. Along with the reinforcement, the student receives feedback on his spontaneous usage and therefore senses his increased power with regard to expression, both written and oral.

The final stage of the paradigm allows the student to view this element as a specific form of language while comparing it with other forms. The teacher gives a charge or challenge to list all possible ways of saying an idea represented in the particular syntactic pattern under study. In this case, the instruction might say: "How many ways can you say the following?"

Eric is nowhere to be seen

This stage develops the student's command of linguistic form and provides a medium for examining changing connotations with the change of form.

Limited Utility

The CLEP model is a method of conditioning; little more than a variation on the fundamental design for teaching phonic elements. Its value would be

greatly exaggerated if used as teaching strategy. It is little more than a technique. The context, or larger strategy, for CLEP should be a program of language enrichment, curiosity/inquiry training, and life examination and articulation. In this, a "languaging" context, specific conditioning to needed linguistic controls is a logical extension of living and learning. Without this context, elements learned thru CLEP would be perfunctory, and short-lived.

In brief, the CLEP design is a 'single-element-at-a time' instructional technique. It can be employed effectively with individual students or small groups. It is not age or grade specific. Frequent spaced training sessions are most desirable. The teaching paradigm is meant to complement a full reading/language arts program. It is not a substitute for any existing methods of teaching comprehension or language, but an addition.*

ADDENDUM

Ms. Lyndell Finch, our research assistant, tells us that we may be overstating the limitation of the CLEP system when we call it little more than a language conditioning technique. She says that the student-teacher interaction during CLEP lessons is a language enriching experience of considerable merit. As we watch Lindy teach children, we don't doubt that it is true enough of her CLEP lessons.

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